



I. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

A. BIRTH. On September 11, 1862, William Sidney Porter was born in the home of his widowed paternal grandmother. Although not wealthy, the family had position. His father, Dr. Algernon Sidney Porter, who became an alcoholic, had a large practice but little income. His mother died when William was three.

B. EDUCATION. He lived with his paternal grandmother. His father's sister, Miss Lina Porter, supported the family by running a small private school where Will received all his formal education. Under her influence, he read the classics. His schooling ended at age fifteen when he went to work in his uncle's drug store. At nineteen he became a registered pharmacist. Experience completed his knowledge of the world.

C. MARRIAGE. In Austin, Texas, on July 1, 1887, he eloped with Athol Estes. To them was born a daughter, Margaret. Athol died of tuberculosis on July 25, 1897. In 1907 Porter married Sara Lindsay Coleman.

D. PHYSICAL APPEARANCE. About five feet, six inches tall, he weighed 130 pounds. He had a long twisted mustache, coal black hair, and gray eyes. After years of dissipation, he became fat and coarse featured.

E. CAREER. He early showed talent for sketching and writing. At nineteen, because of a hacking cough, he went to Texas with Dr. Hall, where he became a permanent guest of friends. Some thought him ungrateful and irresponsible, but actually he was oversensitive and vulnerable because of his deprived childhood.

During these first Texas years he sketched and tried to find himself. He studied the dictionary and supposedly knew every word. Many stories abound of how he picked the name O. Henry. In his early Texas days he signed himself as O. Henry in a friend's autograph book.

In 1887 he took a job in a land office where he worked for four years. He published sketches but made little money. Then he went to the First National Bank of Austin, where bank practices were very careless. Officers helped themselves to cash when they wished. To make extra money Porter bought *The Iconoclast* and renamed it *The Rolling Stone*. Actually, it lost him money. In 1894 the examiners found a bank shortage, and Porter quit his job. He worked full time at *The Rolling Stone*, and some of his work foreshadows what he would do later. The paper ceased publication in April, 1895, and in October Porter went to report for the *Houston Post*. Porter was judged innocent of embezzlement by all but the federal examiner. On February 10, 1896, Porter was indicted and arrested four days later. Friends put up a bond. He returned to Houston, got a lawyer, and borrowed money. His request for continuance was granted. He did nothing to prepare for trial.

Although his wife's health was failing, Porter, on July 6, 1896, disappeared, going via New Orleans to Honduras. He was absent about a year and returned because Athol, his wife, was dying. His trial was held up until after her death.

In December, 1897, he sold *The Miracle of Lava Canyon* to a national magazine, *McClure's*. In February, 1898, he was found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to five years at Ohio State Penitentiary (he served three years). About this time he dropped the William from his name and changed the Sidney to Sydney. In prison he became the pharmacist on night duty, a better-than-average position. During his three years of prison he wrote fourteen of his best stories. He was released on July 24, 1901. In prison he used pseudonyms, his own name, but mostly O. Henry.

After his release he worked for the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* and continued to write stories. In 1902 he went to New York, where he withdrew into himself, drinking two quarts of whiskey a day. For two years he wrote a story a week for the *Sunday World*. He made good money but remained in debt. Never realistic, he perhaps invented his surprise endings to satisfy his need for novelty in a grown-up world. In 1904 he brought out *Cabbages and Kings*, a loose collection of stories set in Honduras. In 1906 came *The Four Million*, mostly stories from the *World*, set in New York. Other volumes of short stories followed. He sold the dramatic rights to *A Retrieved Reformation*. As a play named *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, it made \$800 a week. O. Henry received nothing. Although his health was failing, he thought he could write a successful play, but he could neither do that nor write the novel he visualized. He could scarcely write a story. His work has outlasted great praise and great neglect. Critics say he never lived up to his talent.

F. DEATH. O. Henry died on June 5, 1910, of cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, and dilated heart.

II. IMPORTANT WORKS

A. COLLECTIONS OF SHORT STORIES

<p>From The Four Million (1906) <i>The Gift of the Magi</i></p>	<p>The day before Christmas Della Young grieves because she has only \$1.87 with which to buy her husband, Jim, a gift. The couple have only two treasures: Della's beautiful hair and Jim's watch. Della sells her hair to a wigmaker and buys a fob for Jim's watch. Jim sells his watch and buys combs for Della's hair. In their love for each other, they agree that their gifts can wait for use. O. Henry says they are the magi, the ones who know how to give gifts.</p>
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<p>From Roads of Destiny (1909) <i>A Retrieved Reformation</i></p>	<p>Jimmy Valentine, a safecracker, is released from prison and advised to reform. He goes back to his old business, until he arrives in a little town in Arkansas, where he sees the banker's daughter, Annabel Adams. Jimmy changes his name to Ralph D. Spencer and goes into the shoe business and courts Annabel. Ready to get married, Jimmy is about to give away his tools for safecracking when detective Ben Price comes in search of Jimmy. Annabel's niece, May, locks her sister, Agatha, in the new vault; and nobody can get her out. Jimmy takes his tools and saves the child. He surrenders to Ben Price, who turns him away, saying he doesn't know him, leaving Jimmy free to live as Ralph D. Spencer and marry Annabel.</p>
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<p>From Sixes and Sevens (1911) <i>Makes the Whole World Kin</i></p>	<p>A burglar enters a house to rob it. When he tells the citizen of the house (otherwise empty) to raise his arm, the citizen can't on account of rheumatism. The burglar starts discussing the illness because he, too, has it. In the end the two go out together to get a drink, the citizen forgetting his money so that the treats are on the burglar.</p>
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<p>From The Trimmed Lamp (1907) <i>The Last Leaf</i></p>	<p>Johnsy, a young artist, gets pneumonia and tells her roommate, Sue, that she [Johnsy] will live only until the last leaf falls from the ivy vine outside the window. Sue tells this fancy to an old man, Behrman, a failure as an artist. In the night he goes up and paints a leaf on the wall. Behrman dies of pneumonia, but Johnsy recovers.</p>
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B. SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKS

Cabbages and Kings (1904)
Heart of the West (1907)
The Voice of the City (1908)
The Gentle Grafter (1908)
Options (1909)
Strictly Business (1910)
Whirligigs (1910)
Rolling Stones (1913)
Waifs and Strays (1917)

III. CENTRAL THEMES

A. VINDICATION OF A CHARACTER WHO HAS LOST HIS RIGHT TO ACCEPTANCE BY SOCIETY. SYMPATHY FOR UNDERDOG. Whistling Dick, a tramp, saves the house of Bellemeade from robbery. (*Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking*, *Roads of Destiny*) Jimmy Valentine risks discovery and loss of his bride by revealing his art as a safecracker. (*A Retrieved Reformation*, *Ibid.*)

B. TRUE LOVE GLORIFIED BY SACRIFICE. Della and Jim each give their most cherished possession for the other. (*The Gift of the Magi*, *The Four Million*)

C. COINCIDENCE IN THE ADVENTURES OF MEN. Rudolf Steiner gets a ticket marked "the green door" and finds a starving girl with whom he falls in love. (*The Green Door*, *Ibid.*) Miss Leeson names the one star she can see through her skylight, Billy Jackson. Almost dead of starvation, she is taken to a hospital where the physician who attends her and loves her is named Dr. Wm. Jackson. (*The Skylight Room*, *Ibid.*)

D. THE DEAD CALLING TO THE LIVING. Eloise Vashner, suicide in the room, fills the room with her scent to call her young man to death. (*The Furnished Room*, *Ibid.*)

E. THE SENTIMENTAL HEART OF MAN. Although Jimmy recognizes in his old friend, Bob, a wanted criminal, he can't arrest him, but has someone else do it. (*After Twenty Years*, *Ibid.*) Calliope pretends to be the city marshal to please his mother, and the marshal goes along with it. (*The Reformation of Calliope*, *Heart of the West*)

F. HUMOROUS CRIMINAL RATHER THAN VICIOUS. IRONY WITHOUT BITTERNESS. The burglar takes out the rheumatic man rather than rob him. (*Makes the Whole World Kin*, *Sixes and Sevens*) When Soapy wants to get into prison, he can't. When he has decided to reform, he gets arrested. (*The Cop and the Anthem*, *The Four Million*)

G. GREAT DESIRE TO BE ACCEPTED BY CIVILIZATION. Both partners think they are outcasts and fall in love. When they discover they are free, they forget each other and head for home. (*The World and the Door*, *Whirligigs*)

H. WEARERS OF DISGUISE - THE IMPOSTER. Chicken Ruggles poses as Black Eagle so long as he profits therefrom. (*The Passing of Black Eagle*, *Roads of Destiny*) James Williams is taken for Pinky in *Sisters of the Golden Circle*. *Ibid.*

I. IRONY OF CIRCUMSTANCE. Miss Marian, a wealthy girl in disguise, wants a steady man. Tower Chambers puts on a playboy act and loses her. (*Lost on Dress Parade*, *Ibid.*) Tildy is kissed and is proud of it, and tells everyone to gain attention. She is happy. Then the fellow apologizes and ruins all. (*The Brief Debut of Tildy*, *Ibid.*)

IV. MEANING DEVICES: (Illustrations from his whole body of work)

A. CHARACTERS AND SETTING. O. Henry sympathizes with the downtrodden, makes his criminals amusing rather than vicious, believes in youth, and depicts reverses without bitterness.